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## ABSTRACT

When an instructor was asked to serve as the second vice president for the Eastern Communication Association, she found ways to incorporate her students into the process of convention planning. To assist her in her duties she developed a special topics course in applied communication that required the students to carry out much of the work for the convention. The objectives of the planning class were as follows: (1) to provide students with an opportunity to prepare for and to attend a regional conference; (2) to enable students to develop skills in fund raising, public relations, and human relations; (3) to create outlets for students to create materials in advertising, news releases, layout and displays. The course was also designed to incorporate teamwork, creativity, and many communication skills. The course met once a week and consisted of discussion about convention planning, talks from guest speakers, and opportunities for students to work in their teams. These teams were organized according to topics such as receptions, hospitality, publicity, registration, and audio-visual management. The students responded to the challenge. The groups coalesced into teams that could think and handle numerous problems quickly. Their evaluations of the course testified to how successful an experience it was for them. A one-page course description, tentative schedule, team work and group report assignment, writing assignment, and conference organization chart are included. (TB)

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## Convention Planning: Enriching the Senior Experience with an Applied Communication Class

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Presented at the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association,  
November 18, 1995, San Antonio, Texas.

When I was asked to serve as Second Vice President for the Eastern Communication Association I had no idea the work that this would entail. I was faced with the task of planning all of the local arrangements for a conference to be held in Washington D.C., on a budget that was far more suitable for much smaller convention cities. Knowing that a lot of people would be needed to make the convention a success, I found ways to incorporate students in the planning process. Through independent studies and finally a class called "Convention Planning," students were able to distill the skills and theory they had been learning in the classroom into an applied communication experience. At the same time, this course made it possible for me to meet the expectations of my position in the Association. Thus, we were all to gain from the experience.

### **The Convention Planning Class**

The Convention Planning class consisted of thirty students, with the majority being Communication seniors. As a special topics course, the Convention Planning class was designed to provide students with hands-on experience in planning a convention for an academic association. The objectives included:

- Providing students with an opportunity to prepare for and to attend a regional communication association conference;
- Enabling students to develop skills in fund-raising, solicitation of donations, public relations, and human relations;
- Supplying outlets for students to create materials in advertising, news releases,

layout and displays;

- Providing students with opportunities to learn from professional convention planners.

### **Class Requirements**

With these objectives in mind, the course was designed to incorporate teamwork, creativity, and many communication skills. The requirements for the course emphasized each of these objectives:

- *Group Presentation/Team Project:* Students selected a team that they wanted to participate in for the semester. The team worked together during some class sessions, but mostly had to meet outside of class. The teams represented the following areas: receptions, hospitality, publicity, registration, and audio-visual management. Each team was responsible for on-going progress reports, a presentation to the class prior to the convention, and a final report based on how they handled their responsibilities at the convention.
- *Writing Portfolio/Journal:* Students were required to keep a journal about their weekly efforts in planning their part of the conference. Additionally, they were required to write about their experiences. For example, they were to interview conference participants, to attend panel presentations, to attend a reception, to discuss their worst and best moments during the conference.
- *Operations Audit:* This assignment consisted of a specific set of questions about the hotel and the surrounding area that students had to answer prior to the conference. The operations audit consisted of very basic questions

(where's the restroom, where is a certain conference room, how do I get to Georgetown), to more detailed ones (how far is it to walk to the Washington Monument). Students did not fully appreciate this assignment until they were in the midst of the conference and having to answer many of these questions for the attendees.

Participation was obviously an important part of this class and each student was required to put in a set number of hours at the conference. There was also a final exam that essentially consisted of "Final Reflections" about the student's experience in the class.

### **Teaching Method**

The class met once a week and consisted of discussion that centered around some aspect of convention planning, followed by time for the students to work in their teams. Taking advantage of the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area, we were fortunate to have some excellent guest speakers including a former GMU communication alum who currently does convention planning, and Norma Geiger who does the planning for most of the SCA Conventions. We also had a speaker who ended up providing students with other opportunities such as the World's Cup and Olympics Committee.

On nights when a speaker was not scheduled, we often engaged in brainstorming sessions as we decided reception sites, guest speakers, and discussed general trouble shooting areas. For example, the week before the conference began we talked over possible convention scenarios that could occur and how we might handle them.

### **Planning Teams**

As mentioned above, students were required to work in teams on specific parts of the

convention. It is necessary at this point to provide some explanation about each of the teams.

Receptions. With the help of a Bachelor of Individualized Studies (BIS) student who wanted to work on a major convention for her senior project, the reception team was responsible for planning eight different reception/food activities on an extremely limited budget. The major gatherings consisted of a reception on Capitol Hill with Richard Gephardt as the guest speaker, a dessert and coffee reception to honor the ECA president, and a champagne reception for the ECA vice president. The students were responsible for setting a budget for each gathering, shopping around for the best prices, and working at the receptions during the conference. They were also responsible for inviting members of the House and Senate to the Capitol Hill reception.

Hospitality. This committee was responsible for planning the hospitality table at the conference (to consist of maps, brochures, and give away items), planning various walking tours around Washington, creating children's activities, and arranging dinner and a show at the Kennedy Center.

Publicity. The publicity committee was primarily responsible for fund-raising activities prior to the conference, gift solicitation, press releases, welcome letters for the program, articles for the ECA newsletter, and coffee hour drawings.

Registration. This team was responsible for assisting the ECA Secretary at the convention, setting up a room monitor schedule, arranging for flowers, and developing the information handbook. This handbook consisted of a guide to restaurants, museums and nightlife. It also included original artwork and coupons for discounts from area vendors.

Audio-Visual Management. In an effort to save a great deal of money, we opted to

supply the audiovisual equipment for the conference, rather than paying the hotel for the service. This team was responsible for collecting audiovisual equipment to use at the conference, for arranging the av schedule, overseeing the exhibit area and creating signs.

### **The Convention and Aftermath**

One of the most satisfying moments of my teaching career was to watch this group of students coalesce into a professional team of men and women who could think quickly, handle numerous problems (some of which I'll never really know about), and present a very credible image of my institution and department. Each reception went well (Gephardt actually showed up), students were always available to answer questions at the hospitality table, many gifts given and services were donated, the registration process ran smoothly, and even the audiovisual team was successful, getting all the equipment to the right places, most of the time.

Through the efforts of these students, over \$4100 was raised in gifts, cash donations, and services, and we managed to end up underbudget for the entire conference. While we all worked very hard to make the 1994 ECA Conference a success, some of the most gratifying moments came when my colleagues from around the region remarked about the professionalism of my students. The thank you notes and phone calls I received all noted the manner in which the conference was handled. I was proud to watch my students succeed—to see everyone come together while working towards an interdependent goal.

### **Student Reflections**

To understand the impact this course had on the students, it is worthwhile to consider

their final reflections. Here are some of their responses to two questions I asked on their final exam: "If you were interviewing with an educational association for a position that had convention management as part of your work, what would you say about how this class has prepared you for that part of the job?"; and "If a friend were interested in taking this course and wanted to know more about it, what would you say?":

Taking this convention planning class has made me develop a great respect for convention planners—to make things flow easily or appear to flow easily is very deceptive since I now know all the hard work and last minute glitches that occur. . . this class has helped me sharpen my organizational and problem-solving skills. Also, to learn how to deal more diplomatically with all the convention participants.

I was able to see a convention pass through almost every phase and I am familiar with how to handle the many and various duties encompassed within conventions. I have an advantage now because I've been a part of one behind the scenes.

Having been part of the behind the scenes part of the convention, I know the headaches along with the gratifying accomplishments. I gained a real understanding of the importance of time-management. Also I learned how important interpersonal skills are when working on a project such as this.

It was wonderful because you get practical experience. Most classes are theoretical

and hard to apply to real life. You end up feeling very successful and meeting a lot of nice people. Two thumbs up!

I would tell my friend to definitely take the class. It has been the most practical course I've taken because the skills we've developed, organizational, a sense of responsibility, and networking, can't be learned in a regular classroom setting. Not to mention it was so much fun you couldn't really think of it as class.

That it is a wonderful "real life" experience,  
That it is a practical group dynamics experience,  
That is a lot of hardwork, but worth it,  
That it takes a week to recover.

This course ends my academic career on a high note. This has truly been the best school experience of my life! I would say you must take this course. (written by a math major)

### **The Senior Experience**

All in all, the experience of planning ECA Convention was one that few of us will forget. By providing students with a hands-on experience, the Convention Planning class served as a capstone course for the seniors. In turn, the course enabled me to plan a conference for my colleagues that could highlight Washington, D.C. and still be affordable.

We all learned and gained from this experience.

This course was a special course responding to a special situation. I am in no hurry to plan another conference, but I do know that were I in a similar situation, I would find ways to directly engage students in the process. The experience these students gained and the lessons they learned about convention planning had an impact on their overall college experience.

## **COMM 399: Convention Planning**

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**Office Hours: T,W,R 3-4, and by appointment**

### **Course Description:**

As a special topics course this class is primarily designed to provide students with knowledge about hands-on experience in planning a convention for an association consisting of academics and professionals who work in the communication discipline within the eastern region of the United States.

### **Course Objectives:**

- 1) To provide students with an opportunity to prepare for and to attend a regional communication association conference;
- 2) To enable students to develop skills in fund-raising, solicitation of donations, public relations, and human relations;
- 3) To supply outlets for students to create materials in advertising, news releases, layout and displays;
- 4) To furnish students with exercises to improve oral and written communication skills;
- 5) To provide students with opportunities to learn from professionals.

### **Readings:**

There is no textbook for this course. Readings will be assigned as necessary and are available in the reserved reading section of the library.

### **Requirements:**

|                                 |     |
|---------------------------------|-----|
| Group Presentation/Team Project | 25% |
| Writing Portfolio/Journal       | 30% |
| Operations Audit                | 10% |
| Participation                   | 20% |
| Exam                            | 15% |

## Tentative Schedule

| Date | Topic                                                            | Assignment                                                                                                                                               |
|------|------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1/27 | Introductions/Assign Groups                                      |                                                                                                                                                          |
| 2/3  | Overview to Conference Planning; The Art of the Professional     | "The Meetings Industry"; "Meetings, Conventions and Trade Shows"; "Set Objectives and Establish the Budget"; "Avoiding the Potholes of Meeting Planning" |
| 2/10 | Guest Speaker: Norma Geiger, Comptroller (Speech Comm Assoc)     | "Associations"; "SCA Planning Manual"                                                                                                                    |
| 2/17 | Guest Speaker                                                    | "Convention and Visitors Bureaus"; "Promotion"                                                                                                           |
| 2/24 | Guest Speakers: Dana Richter and Karen Zimmerman (Hyatt Regency) | "Meeting Services and Personnel"; "Signage, Communications and Security"                                                                                 |
| 3/3  | Group Work/Review for Exam                                       |                                                                                                                                                          |
| 3/10 | <del>Exam/Group Work</del>                                       | DUE: Portfolio/Journal                                                                                                                                   |
| 3/17 | Spring Break                                                     |                                                                                                                                                          |
| 3/24 | Group Reports: Publicity                                         | "Where Have All the Sponsors Gone?"; "Putting Your Marketing Plan to Work"                                                                               |
| 3/31 | Group Reports: Hospitality Table                                 | "Hidden Treasures"; "Tuned into D.C."; "Best Sites for Children"                                                                                         |
| 4/7  | Group Reports: Receptions                                        | "Drinking Light"                                                                                                                                         |
| 4/14 | Group Reports: Registration/AV Management                        | "The Turnstile on Meeting Space"                                                                                                                         |
| 4/21 | Final Preparation/Trouble Shooting                               | "Access for All"; "Emergencies and Problem Solving"                                                                                                      |
| 4/28 | Final Project: ECA Convention                                    |                                                                                                                                                          |

## Team Work and Group Report

Given the nature of this class and the many tasks which need to be performed in preparation for the conference, teams will be formed to accomplish various tasks. Tasks will include activities which prepare for the conference and activities which will be done during the convention. The tasks will mostly take place out of class and will require you to practice good communication, organizational and persuasive skills.

Each team will have a team leader, though everyone must do an equal share of the work. The oral presentation for class should take the form of a progress report. The purpose is for you to explain what you have accomplished to date, to inform the class about what your team will be doing at the conference, and to receive feedback from the rest of the class.

The team presentations are scheduled for March and April, prior to the conference. The report should consist of the following points, and each group member should play an equal part in the oral presentation.

- 1) What is the major focus of the team? What are your goals for the semester?
- 2) What has been your plan of attack? How did you organize yourselves and approach the tasks?
- 3) Describe what you will be doing at the ECA Conference.
- 4) How is this area handled by other associations?
- 5) What roadblocks did you discover along the way? What has been your greatest success so far?
- 6) What problems do you foresee and how do you plan to deal with them before they occur?
- 7) How will you measure your group's success?

At the end of the semester, the group will turn in a final group report about the overall accomplishments. This should be no more than 5 pages. Each group member will also turn in a 2-4 page paper about the team's efforts. This paper is individually written. Each student will receive an individual and group grade. The group project is worth 25% of your final grade.

## Writing Portfolio/Journal Entries

This assignment combines specific questions for a writing portfolio and regular journal entries. The assignment will be collected twice during the semester.

- A. You are required to keep a weekly journal about your efforts in conference planning—these entries may be handwritten, and they should be weekly (not all entered the week before they are due). Neatness in this area does not matter as much as providing an on-going of your activity.

This part of the assignment is worth 60 points out of 200.

- B. The writing portfolio assignments consist of the following questions/items (you may omit either 3, 4, or 5 so that you've answered a total of six questions):

- 1) What is the ECA? Describe what the association is about and the purpose of having an Eastern Communication conference.
- 2) Discuss the importance of professional networking. Identify two professional associations you might join in the future. Why did you choose these two?
- 3) Attend two presentations at the ECA Conference (not social events). Describe what you learned and provide a critique of the presentations.
- 4) Attend one social gathering at the ECA Conference. Describe your reactions. What did you learn?
- 5) Interview two people who attend the ECA conference (non-GMU people). Find out why they come to conventions, what they are interested in, what activities they usually participate in, etc.
- 6) Identify the worst moment during the conference. What was the best moment?
- 7) Discuss what you learned during the semester in this class.

The writing portfolio should be 3-4 pages per entry. Each entry must be typed and is worth 40 points for a total of 300 points.

# ECA Conference Organization Chart

|                   |                     |                          |          |                         |                  |        |                  |
|-------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|----------|-------------------------|------------------|--------|------------------|
|                   |                     |                          | Pres     |                         |                  |        |                  |
|                   |                     |                          | 1st VP   |                         |                  |        |                  |
|                   |                     |                          | 2nd VP   |                         |                  |        |                  |
|                   |                     |                          | Adm Asst |                         |                  |        |                  |
| Receptions        |                     | Hospitality<br>Table     |          | Publicity               | Registration     |        | AV Man           |
| Hill Recept       | Congress<br>Invites |                          |          | Fundraising             | Assist Regis     |        | Arrange<br>Sched |
|                   |                     | Display                  |          | Gift Solicit            | Inform Packet    | Adver  | Equip<br>Set-up  |
| Pres Recept       |                     |                          |          |                         |                  | Design |                  |
|                   |                     |                          |          |                         |                  | Copy   | Videotape        |
| VP Recept         |                     | Tours                    | Walks    |                         |                  |        |                  |
| Exec<br>Luncheons |                     |                          | Trans    | News<br>Releases        | Room<br>Monitors |        |                  |
|                   |                     |                          |          | Letters for<br>Program  | Flowers          |        | Exhibit<br>Area  |
|                   |                     | Children's<br>Activities | Walks    | Newsletter<br>Info      |                  |        | Signage          |
| Breakfast         |                     |                          |          | Coffee Hour<br>Drawings |                  |        |                  |
|                   |                     | Dinner<br>Theatre        | Trans    |                         |                  |        |                  |
| Other             |                     |                          |          |                         |                  |        |                  |